

Czech Schools and the Opportunities of Grant Support

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The Department of Educational Science is the unit of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, in Brno, the Czech Republic. It provides bachelor, master and doctoral degree programs in Education as a Social Science, and also a bachelor program in Social Education and Counselling. Partially, it participates in pre-service teacher education, and also in in-service teacher training and school development activities.

Department members are involved in research and development work in the Czech Republic and internationally. Their main focus stays on the school, its internal and external relations. Among the latest research projects are 'The Culture of the Czech School and the Strategies of its Development' (2001-03) and 'The Position of Parents as Educational and Social Partners of the School' (2001-03). As for the development, the Department members have been currently involved, for instance, in the Socrates-Comenius projects (EU-funded), such as the European School Development Project, 'Professional Investigation and Learning for Headmasters', 'Evaluation Strategies for Improving School Leaders' Training Programmes - A European Perspective'. More information can be found on the website at www.phil.muni.cz.

One of the consequences of recent changes in Czech society and education is that schools are more than ever expected to be able to gain support for their activities, searching for them over and above the regular extra-school grant resources. It seems that today's opportunities of grant and foundation support to Czech schools are quite varied.

The sources financial support comes from are miscellaneous: Czech and foreign foundations, grant agencies, EU programmes and a variety of home and foreign non-profit organizations. However, such sources not being guaranteed, schools have to compete for them. They have adapted themselves to the new situation diversely, and it can often be seen that there are only a few guidelines for Czech schools, along with their students and teachers, to find one's bearings in the tangle of offers.

The need to detect how Czech schools prosper through the grants available to them was the impetus for a project called Czech and Foreign Grant Offers: Employment by Schools of Secondary and Tertiary Level. This was performed in 2001-2002 by members of the Department of Educational Sciences of the Brno Masaryk University, based on an assignment by the National Training Fund of Prague.

The research project was divided into two parts. A list of available grant assignments was made during stage one, classifying them by their input requirements, difficulty, and subject matters. In stage two, the behaviour of schools to grants was examined, using a large questionnaire survey, interviews and document analyses. The subject being studied was how schools generally make appeal for grants, how successfully they compete for grants, how they judge grant offers, what reasons they have for to refrain from such competition, how they obtain information on grant offers and by which criteria they choose from them, which techniques schools use to work with grant offers, whether schools would acknowledge extra support in such work, and how they imagine such support would work.

What Offers May Czech Schools Choose From?

The first step towards the accomplishment of the research assignment was the compilation of a database of donors. Information about what various grant agencies and foundations do offer was sought on the Internet, in the advertisements of daily press and magazines, and in the publications of several institutions and organizations. The final list contained 309 items, though the complete number of existing donors is obviously higher. Apart from constant and steady ones, there are those that appear rather irregularly, in view of their actual situation, or those only being established now and thus difficult to obtain information about.

The list contains home and foreign offers. Schools can predominantly choose from within the country (at 60:40), while individuals get almost three-quarters of their opportunities from abroad. Most grant offers are designed for schools of tertiary education, mainly universities, while those meant directly for secondary schools or higher vocational colleges are scarce. Nonetheless, many offers do not specify the target school (28 % of grants for individuals and as many as 51 % of those for institutions). Large opportunities are therefore open to any educational institution or individuals from such an institution.

As for the professional focus of applicants, most offers are not specified. Ranking second are those meant for humanities and, separately, pedagogies and psychology. The database being related to educational institutions, such arrangements are easily understandable.

Some offers contain certain input limitations for the applicant. Among the most frequent, there are restrictions concerning the applicant's domicile, language skills, or age.

As for the formal requirements of the application, they are more demanding for individual applicants than for institutions. Institutional applications typically consist of a form to be completed and an additional text to substantiate the application. With individuals, such basis must frequently be enlarged by reference letters, and applications must, much more often, be written in foreign languages. This probably corresponds with the fact that individual applicants have a wider choice of international offers, which are often highly formalized in their requirements.

Regarding the contents of applications, the applicant must usually prove his or her knowledge of the subject, describe the context of the problem, or quote sources. Even more demanding are such requirements for institutions, obliged to usually submit two of the above points, while most individual applications would do with one.

Grant applications also contain a financial proposal of the project (justification of specific financial

stipulations, withdrawal timing, travel expense specifications), in rather broad outlines, though. Quite usual seems to be a supposition of the applicant's financial participation.

The presumed project outputs are rather scarcely given in a very explicit formulation. If so, they usually have the form of a report for the assignor. The communication between the donor and potential applicants goes, in most cases, through the Internet, which is where application forms and relevant information for the completion are to be found. Strongly underestimated, however, is the follow-up communication with those who already have submitted their applications. The publication of formerly successful applicants is more frequent at institutional grants (53 %, while at individual ones, 23 %). The information on the ratio of successful/turned down applications is rather marginal, as is any feedback for those rejected.

How Do Czech Schools Employ Grant Offers?

Schools' relation to existing grant offers was examined through a large questionnaire survey (all private higher educational institutions, 115 faculties of state-funded higher educational institutions, 173 higher vocational colleges, and 600 randomly selected secondary schools; at a response rate of 38 % with higher institutions, 25 % with vocational colleges, and 20 % with secondary schools). Additional source of information were interviews with school representatives, analyses of public reports of leading grant subjects and schools' annual reports.

Generally, the managing representatives of all school types consider the procurement of means from grant resources as important and necessary. Nevertheless, certain differences can be traced among different school levels. Basically, the degree of backing grows with the level of the school. Contrary to higher educational institutions, secondary school head teachers and vocational college directors do not perceive that strongly the attainment of grants as an indicator of a 'good' and self-constituting school. They less frequently consider the efforts to attain grants as a natural part of school administration, and they are somewhat more sceptical to the process of granting than their colleagues of higher educational institutions.

Scepticism Prevents Application

It can also be seen that once schools get involved in the competition for grants, they can be quite successful. As for such 'success rate', no particular differences among various school types can be traced. Nevertheless, there is quite a large number of secondary school head teachers and higher vocational college directors who have never applied for any grant for their schools. Financial well-being was never mentioned as a reason for not taking part in the competition - the main reason for such absence is probably their scepticism about the matter.

Interestingly, the managing staffs of all school types reflect quite similarly on various characteristics of most grant offers. Despite some minor differences, the common view of grants says they are limiting as for their input requirements and demanding in their requisitions of form and contents and in their financial preconditions. At the same time, they are financially attractive for applicants, in most cases laborious to get outputs and results, and usually interesting in their topics. The rules of the allowance of grants are, by most respondents, regarded as evident. (Yet, nearly one-fourth of them, at each school type, consider them unclear.)

Somewhat differently considered are the 'European' projects, at which formal awkwardness, on one hand, but better communication with donors, on the other, are often commented on. Members of the managing staffs of higher educational institutions almost coincide in the opinion that a specific category is constituted by Czech development grants, which are characterised by less limiting access conditions and less demanding form, contents, and finance - but showing low requirements for outputs and results, offering unattractive money, uninteresting topics, and unclear rules of decision-making.

Laborious Work on Grant Applications

The schools struggling for grants most frequently look for relevant information in the Internet. They also seem to be receiving external advice, such as from education authorities. Leaders at all school levels admit that the work with grants is laborious and - despite any partial success - most of them call for assistance and support. Their idea of such assistance and support is highly varied, encompassing virtually all subjects of the educational system and miscellaneous donors, and referring to all important stages of the grant process.

Conclusion

The research project of *Czech and Foreign Grant Offers: Employment by Schools of Secondary and Tertiary Level* has shown that those who want to attain support for the development of their institutions or themselves can choose from a relatively large offer of resources. A number of educational programmes of the European Union, the OECD, the Council of Europe, and other international organizations are available. Except for them, there are many minor foundations and grant agencies, both national and foreign, some of which have supported our schools for years, others only commencing in such activities and thus still precarious.

It could also be seen that Czech schools have entered relatively well into the competition for grants. Still, their claims for support should not be overlooked.

A contribution for schools to be able to self-consciously and efficiently enter grant tenders, the publication of Grant Offers and Czech Schools sums up the main results of the research project and, importantly, announces the donors and their contact data.